The Buchenwald Memorandum

Sandy Moffat and Alan Riach

It's fifty years exactly since John Bellany, Alan Bold and Sandy Moffat travelled across Europe and visited the former death camp at Buchenwald. It was an experience that changed their lives, and brought them up against the age-old question of the value of art in a world where such horror had happened.

Alan: Almost every week we've had news of atrocities recently. Terrorist attacks upon civilians, deaths brought about by the sheer indifference of profiteers to human well-being, racist violence, verbal and physical. All of it is in a long tradition that seemed to reach a high point of horror in the Second World War. Sandy, you encountered that as a profound shock when you went to Germany in 1967. What happened?
Sandy: It began with a chance encounter on a train. John Bellany and I recognised the composer Ronald Stevenson in the bar of a train returning from Glasgow to Edinburgh. We knew of him only as the composer of the Passacaglia on DSCH, the longest one-movement work for solo piano ever composed, a tribute to Shostakovich which he had presented to the great Russian composer at the 1962 Edinburgh Festival at an event presided over by Hugh MacDiarmid. John and I were young enough to feel bold enough to introduce ourselves to Ronald, so we did, and immediately a friendship began. It was one of those conversations a young artist dreams of having. Ronald introduced the idea that we should go to the Handel Festival in East Germany as delegates of the Federation of Composers in Scotland. We were painters, not composers, but Ronald was the President of the Federation and wasn't dissuaded. All the arts are connected, he said. We didn't think twice. But then we were also saying to ourselves, this is crazy – it won't ever really happen.
Alan: But it did. What happened then?
Sandy: A few weeks later three large envelopes arrived, with all the documentation required, one for John who was living in London, one to me, and one to Alan Bold, our friend, the poet and later the biographer of MacDiarmid. He didn't have much money at that time and said he couldn't come, so John and I travelled out but Alan mustered what he needed from family and friends and was hammering on the hotel door in Hallé 24 hours after we'd arrived in the early hours of the morning and calling out, "Stasi! Open up!" It was one of his practical jokes that fooled us for a few seconds. When we'd crossed the border into East Germany, the tension had filled the train, it was palpable. So we had a moment of wondering if we were to be interrogated but it was Boldy. He'd made it. So the three of us set out to see what things were really like.
Alan: But something else was about to happen, because you weren't just there to fly the flag of youth and vanity. You were after the art – high art, so to speak, opera, theatre, the galleries and concerts. And there was Buchenwald.
Sandy: Yes. That changed everything, but from the start we were out to soak up as much of the arts as we could. We'd acquired our appetite through our reading of MacDiarmid and the Scottish literary Renaissance of the 1920s plus our early forays into the Edinburgh Festival. At this point the idea that the Eastern Bloc and Communism could in fact deliver work of such quality was intriguing, so we wanted to find out about that. Going to operas every night wasn't something you could easily do in Scotland in 1967. Meeting novelists and poets and artists who took you seriously, who believed in what art could do, what it could accomplish, was a different set of priorities from those familiar in Scotland.

We arrived in Cologne on June 8 1967 and got to Hallé the next day. It looked like Glasgow at that time: grey, grim, dark and gloomy. But we got straight down to business,

registering with the Handel Festspiele and on Saturday, we visited the Moritzburg Gallery and saw early Beckmann paintings we'd never seen before. We went to the Handel Museum and took in his opera "Agrippina". We'd no idea then how great a composer Handel is but we found out. On Sunday, we visited Professor Willi Sitte at his home and he showed us his work. He was the President of the Artists' Union and had fought the Nazis himself. He greeted us with open arms and we discussed the situation of the G.D.R. artist in relation to the western artist. We met him several times over the course of the visit. Sitte, who died aged 92 in 2013, survived re-unification and is now rightly considered one of the most important German artists of the post-war period.

On Monday, at a performance of Handel's "Messiah" we met the wife of the Minister of Culture, Frau Doctor Irene Gysi. John Bellany leant over and kissed her hand. This gallant act led to an invitation to stay an extra week in the G.D.R. and Dresden, Leipzig and Weimar now beckoned.

Alan: But then it was Wednesday 14 June, and something else happened.

Sandy: We'd spent the morning in Weimar, visiting the Goethe museum and the Schiller house, and then we were asked, "Where to next?" And we said we wanted to go to the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald and silence fell. We were told, "No, we don't think you should go there, we don't think you want to go there." But we insisted. Ronald Stevenson had told us before we left Scotland that we had to go, so we prevailed and were taken there. It was a terrible revelation and a question, after all the amazing works of art and the people we met, the operas, from Handel to Janacek, Beethoven's "Fidelio", and then suddenly we go through the gates of Buchenwald. And it was the one day of the whole trip when it poured with rain. Everything was black and covered in gloom. The awfulness of the place was inescapable. The whole understanding of the Holocaust was still to come, really. All we'd seen of the Nazis was what we'd been exposed to in films, with heroic Brits like Douglas Bader fighting bravely. We hadn't encountered what we were confronted with here before.

Alan: And it wasn't simply a war story. It was something about humanity at its worst, some universal potential for destruction made visible.

Sandy: We fell silent. There were no easy answers. And when we left and got to the railway station, there was a young woman's voice coming over on the tannoy loudspeakers and we just stopped and stood and listened, it was such a tender, human voice, and full of sadness. And then, when we got back on the train to return to Hallé, as we travelled through the Salle valley, one of the most beautiful train journeys in Europe, the conversation began. The whole day was filled with juxtapositions – the beauty of nature, the horrors of mankind. John would quote that line, "No birds ever sang at Buchenwald again." And Alan Bold was quoting Adorno about the hypocrisy of trying to appreciate art or make music in the understanding that humanity was capable of this, and that the Nazis would go to their quarters after a day in the death camp and play records of Mozart to ease themselves into the evenings. The conversation raged. We were deeply affected.

Alan: What followed from that?

Sandy: On Thursday and Friday we travelled to Dresden, one of the great historic art centres of Germany. In the Kunstmuseum the great revelation was the War triptych by Otto Dix. That probably inspired John himself to attempt the triptych format for his big statements a year or so later. The Zwinger Museum was a mecca for us: a superb collection of Giorgione, Titian, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Cranach, Durer, Velasquez. But most of Dresden was in ruins. Only a single black arch of the Frauenkirche remained, a grim memorial, or perhaps a warning to future generations.

But we were still thinking about Buchenwald. On Saturday we arrived in Berlin, half a ruin, half a construction site, and looked round the city. We went to the Komische Oper to see Janacek's "Jenufa" and we were overwhelmed. It was the musical highlight of our visit.

We only came back to normality, if you like, after "Jenufa". In that opera, terrible things happen, but there is reconciliation, hope returns. This wasn't opera in which fat ladies are warbling interminable arias – this was as grim as reality could be, and serious. The performances were so strong and the production so great that it restored us, in a sense. Afterwards, we headed to the nearest bar. John was saying that now he just wanted to start painting again, and we realised that only through that experience, through what an opera like that could deliver, through art in its various forms – only that could defeat the meaning of Buchenwald. That was the only answer.

We saw other memorable things: on Sunday, Beethoven's "Fidelio", Brecht's "The Threepenny Opera" and the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, and Rembrandt's last self-portrait and works by Beckman, Kokoschka, Grosz and Kirchner back in Cologne. But by the time we were back in London, on June 22, we knew that visit to Buchenwald was central to the whole experience. It changed things forever, that trip of half-a-century ago.

Alan: You told me once about something else that happened almost thirty years later, in the spring of 1995, when you went back to Berlin to attend a symposium held at the Hochschule der Kunste, entitled, "May '45 – Remembrance and the Future – On the Representation of the Non-Representable in the Arts".

Sandy: The terms of the symposium were set out as follows: "In a world plagued by social and ethnic conflict, by war and terrorism, schools of art and design and schools of music are confronted with the challenge to make a contribution toward peace among nations, not only through the work they each carry out in the fields of the arts and education, but also through international co-operation."

All of the speakers – from Russia, France, the Czech Republic, Hungary, the United Kingdom, the United States, Israel, Poland, Latvia, Estonia – offered outstanding papers. Some were moving, others gripping and some electrifying, especially one by the distinguished German musicologist Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, "On the Relationship of Music to Memory" which he started thinking about on May 8, 1945, as he lay wounded in a prisoner of war camp. He ended with these words: "Compose, play, teach and contemplate music as devotedly as ever, but in the knowledge that war and Auschwitz did and do exist; and in the knowledge that nothing is more vital than art for the deepening, the honing, the sensitising of our awareness; but also in the knowledge that music can be ambiguous, that it can – yes, even the music of Beethoven, Liszt, and Bruckner – be used in the service of totalitarianism, war, genocide. Therefore, for all your devotion to art, do not lose sight of that which is the basis of everything: experience, which carrying with it as it does the consciousness of war and Auschwitz can be the defining authority for the active rejection of standardisation, intolerance and totalitarianism."

[Boxed off:]

Engraved in Buchenwald's main entrance gate are the words: "Jedem das Seine" meaning, literally, "To each, his own" but more generally, "Everybody gets what he deserves". This provides the bitter refrain in Alan Bold's poem, "June 1967 at Buchenwald". Here's how it ends.

We turn away. We always do.

It’s what we turn into that matters.

From the invisible barracks at Buchenwald

Where only an unsteady horizon

Remains. The dead cannot complain.

They never do. But we. We live.

Everybody gets what he deserves.

That which once united man

Now drives him apart. We are not so helpless

Creatures crashing onwards irresistibly to doom.

There is time for everything and time to choose

For everything. We are that time, that choice.

Everybody gets what he deserves.

This happened near the core

Of a world’s culture. This

Occurred among higher things.

This was a philosophical conclusion.

Everybody gets what he deserves.

The bare drab rubble of the place.

The dull damp stone. The rain,

The emptiness. The human lack.